



Lingering threats to health

Houstonians have a right to know about the toxic effects of Harvey's floodwaters.

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Photo: Mark Mulligan, Staff Photographer

Houston firefighters use a borrowed canoe to search for evacuees during extreme flooding in Meyerland in the wake of Hurricane Harvey on Aug. 27. (Mark Mulligan / Houston Chronicle)

It took about two weeks for firefighters to start dying from radiation sickness at the Chernobyl nuclear plant. As they rushed into the flames in the Ukrainian morning, the crew didn't know if they were responding to an electrical fire or a core meltdown, nor were they informed about the radioactive threat posed by the debris and smoke.

To date, seven firefighter deaths have been attributed to the 1986 disaster - the most recent in 2004, when one of the heads of the fire brigade died from cancer.

First responders to disasters are not only heroes, but often the first victims.

As Houston recovers from Hurricane Harvey, we have to wonder what toxic chemicals and dangerous bacteria are hiding in the muck and have become ticking timebombs to the long-term health of our firefighters, police officers and cleanup crews. Federal, state and local government must ensure that our public servants and volunteers don't succumb to some hidden illness.

We already know that the waters were dangerous.

"Everybody has to consider the floodwater contaminated," Dr. David E. Persse, the chief medical officer of Houston, said after the storm. While area homes are drying out, the floodwaters' toxins may linger. They could settle into sediment, seep into our groundwater, or drain into our bayous, rivers and bays.

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development downtown, along the Buffalo Bayou, an analysis paid for by the New York Times found startlingly high levels of E. coli in standing water in one family's living room - levels 135 times those considered safe.

More troubling: The team of scientists found elevated levels of lead, arsenic and other heavy metals.

One volunteer nearly lost his life due to contamination from the floodwaters, as documented by Chronicle reporter Daniela Sternitzky-Di Napoli. J.R. Atkins was hospitalized with a deadly flesh-eating bacteria after kayaking through floodwaters to check on his neighbors.



Seven first responders are suing Arkema Inc. after being sickened by toxic fumes at the company's facility in Crosby.

Communities near Superfund sites, such as the San Jacinto waste pits, are left to wonder if they're putting their lives at risk by trying to clean up their homes.

The federal Environmental Protection



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TRANSLATOR

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Agency and its state counterpart, the Texas Environmental Quality Commission, owe it to the people who are going to be doing the dirty work of rebuilding after Harvey to sample what's in area yards, ditches, water wells and creeks. These environmental agencies have focused their water quality sampling on industrial facilities and hazardous waste sites. That is not enough. These agencies owe it to the many weary and careworn people who are moving back into ravaged homes to conduct more tests on the nature and extent of the contamination throughout the county and to release these results expeditiously. The agencies have a duty to make the public aware of the specific contaminants and any potential long-term hazards.

So far, they're failing at that task. The EPA has not released specifics about air pollution levels in east Houston after Harvey, according to the Texas Tribune. And in a kick while we're down, the federal agency has also announced plans to shutter its Houston-area regional lab.

Instead, the regulatory burden is being pushed onto Harris County and the city of Houston. Perhaps the EPA and TCEQ missed the headlines, but our local governments have just been hit with more than 50 inches of rain and the budgets of their health departments have been stretched thin.

The
Gulf
Coast
can't
be



expected to rely on the New York Times to serve as makeshift pollution enforcers. Our environmental agencies must do their jobs.

After the Chernobyl disaster, Soviet citizens were left in the dark about the true dangers they faced. Fatality lists were kept secret, and government denied demands for transparency. The entire crisis became a symbol of the Soviet Union's failures.

As Houston rebuilds, federal and state officials must show that they can keep people safe in the wake of the worst disasters - not only from the immediate threat, but also the dangers that can linger for decades. Houston doesn't need more victims of Harvey.

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